



## Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk

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### **Testimony to Joint Senate and Assembly Election Committee Oversight Hearing on Low Voter Turnout in Los Angeles County**

February 20, 2015

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Good morning Chairman Allen and Chairman Ridley-Thomas, Senators and Assembly Members. My name is Dean Logan and I am the Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk for Los Angeles County.

I am pleased to appear before you today and to participate in this dialogue about voter participation in Los Angeles County. The issues, challenges and opportunities associated with voter engagement and participation in the communities that make up Los Angeles County are extremely important and timely. I want to assure you and your colleagues in the legislature that I take these issues very seriously and recognize their significance to the broader discussion on the health and future of our electoral process in the State.

With 4.8 million registered voters, Los Angeles County is the largest county elections jurisdiction in the nation. To put that in perspective, the registered voter population in the County exceeds the statewide electorate in 42 of the 50 states in the union.

In addition to our size, the County is also characterized by socioeconomic and racial/ethnic diversity. While these elements make for a vibrant democratic process, they also present a number of challenges when it comes to encouraging eligible citizens to register and vote.

For example:

- Despite its large electorate, there are an estimated 1.2 million eligible citizen adults not registered to vote in the County;

- Under the provisions of the federal and state Voting Rights Acts, the County provides language assistance in nine written languages and in-person, bi-lingual support in an additional three languages other than English;
- The geography of the County, covering 4,083 square miles includes both urban and rural areas; coastal and inland regions and communities that represent nearly all extremes of socioeconomic status;
- Los Angeles County residents are also characterized with high rates of mobility. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, on average County residents move every 1.2 years and, as you can imagine, the rate of updating their voter registration information and status is much slower;
- Additionally, data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau indicates the two fastest growing populations in the County are residents between the ages of 18 and 25 and those over the age of 65. And, for the first time in our history, residents under the age of 30 make up a plurality of the County's population.

These demographics underscore the cultural and ethnic diversity the electoral process must bridge to reach and serve all eligible citizens. As the Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk, I serve as the chief elections official charged with the effective administration and conduct of Federal, State and Local elections in Los Angeles County. However, beyond my Department's administrative responsibilities is its responsibility to also ensure that the elections process is accessible to all registered voters through sustained efforts to educate, inform, encourage and facilitate voter participation.

It is my strong belief that increased voter participation is founded on an accessible electoral process that eliminates barriers and reduces the effort and resources necessary for an eligible citizen to register and vote. Increased access to the voter registration process, to information about elections and to the ballot and the options available to cast a ballot are critical to fostering an environment conducive to higher voter participation.

A comprehensive voter outreach and education program is a necessary and critical function of election administration. Our Department maintains a modest yet permanent staffing level devoted to planning and implementing year-round voter outreach and education programs. These efforts sustain our ongoing commitment to foster a strong culture of voter participation in the County; however, the challenge of scale and dwindling resources can often limit the impact of those efforts. I am happy to provide specific examples of these activities during Q&A or as follow-up to today's hearing.

Over the past three decades, voter turnout in Los Angeles County, as in much of the State, has been declining; especially in Primary and Off-Year elections – declining from 53% voter turnout in the 1982 Statewide Primary to 23% in the June 2010 Primary and, more recently, 17% in the June 2014 Statewide Primary. And, as has already been highlighted this morning, we are all alarmed by the historically low turnout in the most recent November 2014 Gubernatorial General Election.

While this decline in participation is relatively recent, history of the American voting experience is ripe with examples of citizens embracing the voting franchise as a means of shifting public policy, flexing civil rights and breaking through barriers. As we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1965 Federal Voting Rights Act, we are reminded of the significance – and the very recent uncertainty and imbalance – associated with the freedom to register and to vote.

Local examples here in Los Angeles County tell stories of voters mobilizing around events and issues despite system limitations or administrative barriers:

- In 2008, when regulatory changes imposed by the Secretary of State curtailed early voting options in Los Angeles County, voters still flocked to our offices in Norwalk literally wrapping in lines around the building to cast votes in advance of Election Day;
- In 2003, voter participation in the off-cycle recall election well exceeded what we experienced in November; and
- In 2011, voters in the City of Bell showed up in droves to reclaim governance of the city in the aftermath of high profile political corruption charges leveled against the City Manager and Council.

Arguably, more than any other electoral jurisdiction in the country, Los Angeles County voters have seen the elections process leveraged to break ethnic, socioeconomic and gender barriers – leading the nation in the election of public officials representing the breadth of the demographics that define the County.

Why then are we experiencing record low rates of voter participation?

Increasingly, the discussion around voter participation has focused on the mechanics of how elections are conducted – the places, dates, times, options and equipment used to vote here in Los Angeles County and beyond. Recent coverage has highlighted statistical disparities between the geographic population base in Los Angeles County and higher rates of voter participation in lower populated regions of the state like the Bay Area and the variance in the numbers of voters registered to vote by mail in other regions of the state compared to Los Angeles County.

With regard to vote by mail, let me be clear that Los Angeles County actively promotes options for voting by mail. And, the use of mail ballots, while consistently remaining below statewide averages, has steadily increased over the past decade. In the past five years, for example, the number of permanent vote by mail voters has increased from just over 600,000 in 2010 to nearly 1.6 million today. I believe you will hear from other speakers today who have researched vote by mail trends and associated demographic impacts in Los Angeles County and across the State. We are continually engaging with those who do that research and, in recognition of the emphasis on vote by mail in the post-election analysis; we will expand our outreach and promotion of vote by mail in Los Angeles County.

Others point to the lack of hotly contested, high profile campaigns and partisan polarization as symptoms of the decline in turnout. Many contend society and younger generations, in particular, are just apathetic and disengaged, yet research indicates a higher rate of participation in other forms of civic engagement such as volunteerism and community activism. Still others surmise that the frequency of elections and/or the outdated equipment we use to vote have deflated the significance of voting or rendered it out of place with today's fast-paced, information-driven way of life.

I believe all of these theories have relevance and should be explored further. There is great opportunity for administrative improvement and expanded outreach and education. Without broader context, however, I believe these theories leave the conversation incomplete and the likelihood of a near-term shift uncertain. Recognizing this, a broader conversation about voter participation, then, has to go beyond the mechanics of how voting works to include the more challenging question of what it means and why large numbers of voters are affirmatively opting out.

To do this, Los Angeles County recently partnered with the Greenlining Institute and the Future of California Elections on a Voter Experience Project in which on scene video interviews were conducted with voters just after they voted at their polling places during the June and November 2014 elections. A summary report and a link to a brief video about the project have been provided for your information. Our next step is to use the same model of engagement – in-person video interviews – with non-voters to get a better handle on the systemic and motivational dynamics that contribute to registered voters opting out of election participation.

It is absolutely incumbent upon those of us charged with the administration of elections to expand and modify the process to ensure ease and access to voting. Los Angeles County has taken on that challenge in an effort to modernize our voting systems based on a voter-centered design and development model that will result in voting equipment that is sustainable, secure and transparent while, at the same time, agile enough to adapt to changing voter preferences, advancements in technology and shifting demographics. I am pleased that those efforts led to the passage of Senate Bill 360; which fundamentally changed the way voting systems are tested and approved in California and that the project was recognized last year as a national model by the Presidential Commission on Election Administration. Again, I have provided supplemental information about the Voting Systems Assessment Project (VSAP) for your reference and review.

That large scale, systemic change to elections administration in Los Angeles County will take time to fully develop and implement. Current projections are to begin implementing the new systems in the 2018 election cycle. In the interim, it is critical that we maintain the integrity and viability of existing systems; and that we expand administrative efforts to increase voter engagement and participation as we bridge to a more modernized voting experience.

Los Angeles County is a media driven market. Because of its size and its demographic and geographic diversity, effective countywide outreach efforts that are truly to scale must incorporate a coordinated media outreach strategy. In particular, for elections, media sources like television, radio, digital, online and print (including ethnic media) are the primary sources voters turn to during election time. An expanded voter outreach and education program requires engagement with a broader spectrum of these outlets.

We have worked to develop strategic partnerships with local media partners – primarily radio – in order to develop and implement comprehensive and substantive media campaigns that go beyond simple ads. We have adopted a strategy of “meeting voters where they are” as opposed to more traditional public outreach models that seek to draw citizens in to government websites and facilities.

In doing that, we have secured commitments from specific media outlets to leverage their resources and their talent to promote voting and elections in new innovative ways taking advantage of social media and other forms of digital media. Additionally, in 2014 we partnered with the Orange County Registrar of Voters in a messaging campaign targeted to the Southern California region and our shared media market offering interactive web-based voter information and promotional messaging about voting and elections on digital radio (Pandora).

Those efforts have proven effective in particular in increased voter registration activity, but they have been limited in scope and reach due to minimal resource allocations. Clearly, increased visibility and emphasis is needed in turning voters out to vote, once registered. Currently, the Department has an annual budget of just \$250,000 for outreach and education activities. In 2008, a time when the County’s turnout was competitively high, the Department implemented a larger scale media campaign with great success, earning national recognition as an innovative best practice by the National Association of Counties (NACO). Unfortunately, those efforts were funded using one-time federal funds from the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) that are not authorized for ongoing activity. For reference, a comprehensive, collaborative media campaign effort in Los Angeles County is estimated to cost in the range of \$500,000 to \$2 million per major election cycle.

In addition to increasing and stabilizing funding for comprehensive voter outreach and education, California is at a point where we can and should begin investing resources and aligning our regulatory framework to support more portable and interactive voting options such as community vote centers,

early voting and expanded mail ballot distribution and drop boxes. To do that effectively, we have to come to terms with the way in which we fund elections and address the current suspension of state mandates that were put in place to support increased vote by mail activity, voter file maintenance, the conduct of special vacancy elections and systemic improvements like the same-day voter registration law that is scheduled to be implemented in 2017.

We also need to address issues of voter fatigue resulting from the frequency of elections and the overlap of local elections – a phenomenon that is exaggerated in Los Angeles County where a total of 38+ elections have been conducted since 2009 – including the upcoming March 17 Special Vacancy election for the 21<sup>st</sup> State Senate district where only one candidate will appear on the ballot, but a full scale election with all its complements is mandated at an estimated cost of \$1.4 million that will be borne by Los Angeles County. Those are resources that, arguably, could be better used to support voter outreach and education activity – and, the frivolity of the election impacts voters’ impressions about the importance of voting.

Better use and collection of data is another focus area. We need to look at micro data analysis to ensure that efforts geared toward increasing voter participation don’t simply address overall turnout, but that they measure the impact and engagement of traditionally underserved or underperforming communities as well. In this regard, it is important to maintain voter education programs and voter information on a year-round basis, not limited to the period just ahead of an election.

Finally, as a community at-large – government, non-profits, civil rights organizations, advocacy and private enterprise – we need to identify the events, examples and medium necessary to inform or remind the electorate of the power of the vote – the leveling impact it can have on the political playing field; the linkage between citizen-driven elections and the adoption of public policy; the foundation it provides for ensuring public safety and the provision of other essential services; and the voice it provides to those who would otherwise be voiceless.

To that end, I have engaged our Community Voter Outreach Committee representing over 200 community and non-governmental organizations and a subset advisory group to help develop a strategy and approach to voter engagement specifically geared toward increased participation in the 2016 election cycle. Preliminary discussions started earlier this year and will continue and expand in the weeks and months ahead.

History has shown that when the electorate is engaged and the power of the vote is ignited, citizens will exercise their right to vote without regard to place, date, time, options or equipment. As we look at increasing our investment in improving the voting experience in Los Angeles County and statewide, we must match that with efforts to reconnect our communities to the power its franchise.

Again, thank you very much for conducting this informational hearing; for bringing increased visibility to this important topic and for the opportunity to address you today. I welcome additional dialogue on these issues and I look forward to working in partnership with your committees and the many organizations represented here today who share a common desire for a more engaged and participative electorate.

#### REFERENCES

Los Angeles County Mobile Outreach Campaign Video Summary  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naQDG8t3GHo&feature=youtu.be>

Greenlining Institute and Los Angeles County “Voter Experience Project” (2014)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqT2D\\_Nezs4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqT2D_Nezs4)